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ABSTRACT

The emerging technology of the World Wide Web is a natural source of acquisitions for archivists. This paper discusses two areas of digital communications: a university archivist's role in the support and management of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) home page, and the uses other archives and special collection departments at selected universities have made of home pages. Being a university archivist often entails acting as a central contact for university-related groups wanting to link a web page to the UNL home page. One of the main problems in working with providers who maintain their own home pages is occasional lack of continuity. The UNL University Archives/Special Collections Department began the project with just the informational site on the UNL Libraries home page, although they hope to begin providing more in-depth coverage about holdings. Other universities have made use of home pages for: information about the institution; public relations; displaying library holdings; and for research of collections. In 1993, the University of California-Berkeley Library received a grant to encode archival finding aids in SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language). Carried out to its fullest extent, this or a similar project could eventually give a researcher online access to the finding aids of every manuscript depository in the country. University archivists everywhere are making use of the Web to make the holdings of their departments more accessible. (AEF)

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ARCHIVISTS IN CYBERSPACE

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Michele L. Fagan

Presented by Michele Fagan, May 17, 1996
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Just like librarians and all the rest of the world, archivists have been investigating the World Wide Web, its potential usefulness, and its impact on their own profession.

Since the Web is basically another form of communication, and the primary purpose of an archives, whether it is in a college, a religious order, or a multinational corporation, is to preserve important communications and other documentation on the evolving history of the parent institution, the emerging technology is a natural source of acquisitions for archivists. In the past archivists received the records, traditionally paper, long after the events covered in them. With the advent of the Web and e-mail, archivists now need to be much more aggressive about catching electronic records almost as soon as they are created. Otherwise the archivist will not get

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anything.¹ Stated bluntly but accurately, if archivists do not keep ahead they will simply become roadkill on the information highway.²

Just as digital communications is changing the way archivist perceive their acquisition duties, these new formats are also altering the nature of how organizations or individuals conduct their lives. Recording change has always been part of an archivist's duties. When hand-written or typed papers were the basic components of preserved information, the documents may have contained the final decisions, not the discussions and compromises that took place beforehand. Often those matters were verbally worked out and not written down. E-mail and the Web have captured more of the immediacy and dynamism involved in decision making because people will now e-mail where in the past they would have telephoned. There should be nothing ephemeral about digital communications as far as the archivist is concerned.³

I will discuss two areas of digital communications; first, my own role in the support and

1. Laurie B. Crum. "Digital Evolution: Changing roles and Challenges for Archivists in the Age of Global Networking." Archival Issues 20 (no. 1 1995):51.

2. Anne Gilliland-Swetland. "Digital Communications: Documentary Opportunities Not To Be Missed." Archival Issues 20 (no. 1 1995): 39.

3. Anne Gilliland-Swetland. "Digital Communications," 40.

3

management of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln homepage, and second, the uses other archives and special collection departments have made of homepages as they attempt to contact their audience.

Part of my duties as university archivist entail acting as a central contact for campus academic and administrative units, student organizations, other university-related groups like the Credit Union or the Alumni Association, and individual faculty members, all wanting to link a web page to the UNL homepage. I get these various providers or servers registered, decide what the optimum links should be, and answer any basic questions. Then I direct them on to others in Information Services working on this same project. I also encourage departments, colleges, and other units to put up homepages. In order to present a good image on the Internet, the University needs to have as much useful information about itself out there as it can. The potential for attracting superior students and faculty is growing all the time.

Information Services provides the framework and some support but each of the University's providers, from the College of Business Administration to an individual faculty member, maintain their own

homepages.4

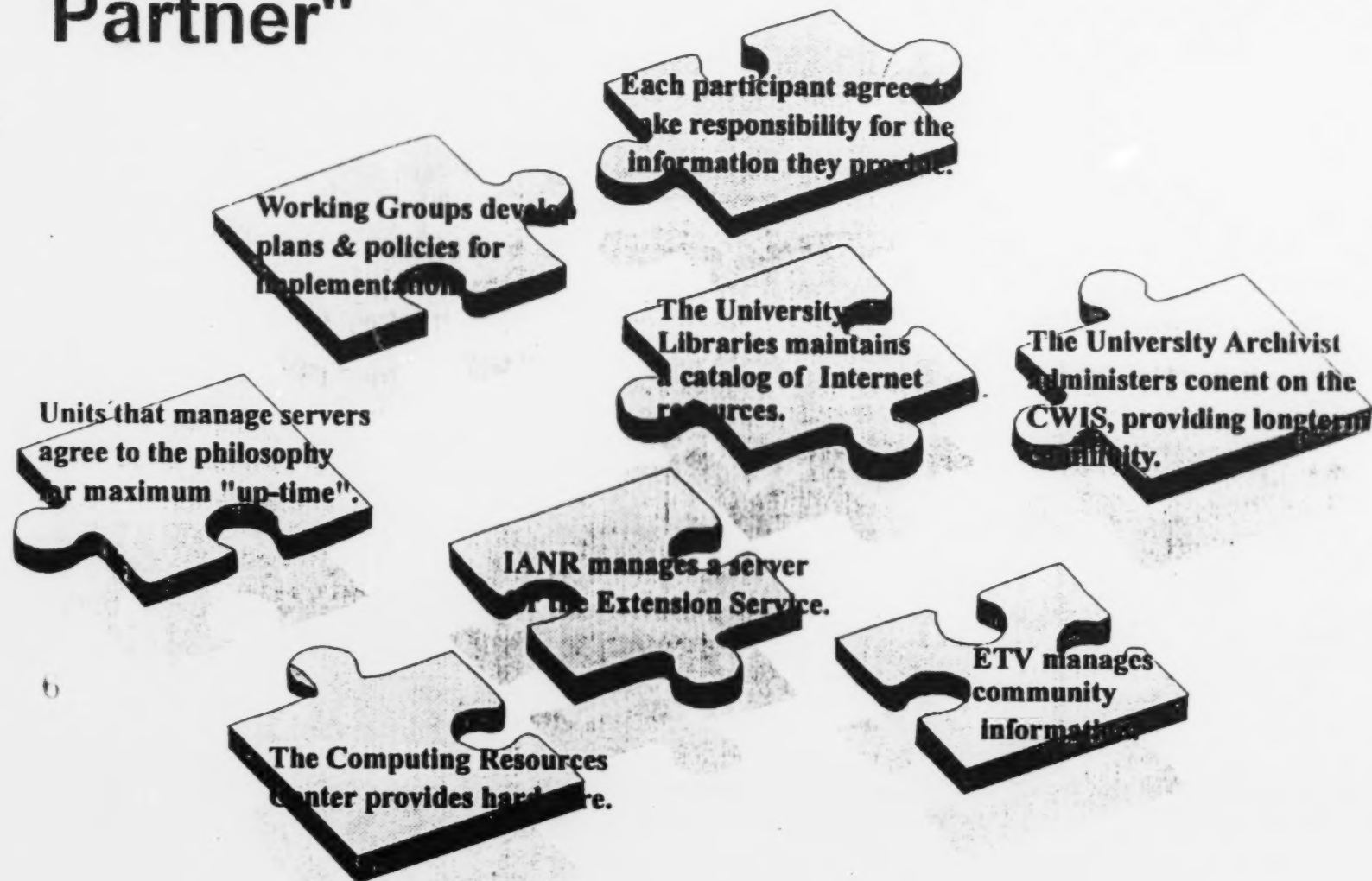
One of the major problems we have discovered in working with providers who maintain their own homepages is occasional lack of continuity. In the early stages of developing the University's homepage, people working on the project realized that student groups might cause a problem by not continuously maintaining their organization's homepage as the composition of the group changed. This has proved to be true. When the original builder and maintainer of the organization's page graduated or left the group, knowledge about the password and procedures for updating material have disappeared. On occasion so has knowledge about the page's very existence. We have encouraged organizations to make the upkeep of the homepage part of one of the officer's duties, but this can only be a suggestion, not a qualification. As it turns out, we did not realize that academic and administrative units would be as subject to the same changes in personnel. A staff member, for example, at the student union offered to build one for her department. Her supervisor had no idea how to do this himself, but it sounded like a great idea, and he gave his approval.

4. Illustration 1, "The Federal Model," was borrowed from DeeAnn Allison, ASO, UNL Libraries. This model has been shown by several Information Service staff members.

The Federation Model:

Illustration I

"Each Participant is an Equal Partner"



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5

Unfortunately the staff member took all her experience with her when she took another position and now no one else in the area knows how to maintain the unit's homepage.

Despite the problems inherent in keeping track of all the providers, I have discovered that working with the UNL homepage benefits my other duties as an archivist. I now contact many more people across campus and vice-versa than I normally would if I was just after their inactive files. The UNL homepage gives me an excellent opportunity to make people aware of my department's existence. After discussing the homepage, I can easily say a few words about the other work in the Archives and our interest in saving a department's older paper files of potential historic value. Since part of my responsibility is checking the links to all the homepages, and seeing that no one is obviously violating US copyright laws or university policy, I also have the chance to download any information that might be changed but does have historical significance.

Presently people who maintain college and university websites are involved in a debate over whether homepages should be strictly informational sites or public relations sites. My own opinion is

that each homepage has elements of both and should be used for both purposes.

A number of university archives and special collections departments have developed homepages that link to the parent library. At this point, however, many of these sites provide little more information than can be found in the traditional paper brochures. For these places the site is primarily a public relations tool. A few departments have turned their pages into truly informational sites, allowing keyword searching and putting the researcher one step away from the actual documents.

A selection of visual aids can take us on a short tour of some of these special collections sites within university homepages. We can see creatively used public relations sites that give some degree of access to the manuscript holdings, and pages that put the researcher in touch with the inventories of manuscript collections.

At this time the UNL University Archives/Special Collections Department just has the informational site on the UNL Libraries homepage. We hope to provide more in-depth coverage about our holdings as soon as we can. Already the UNL original catalogers have placed some record level descriptions of several significant collections like the Mari Sandoz Papers, or the Bernice

Slote Research Collection on Willa Cather into the libraries' online catalog and OCLC. A number of other special collections departments have done similar things over the last few years. This helps to publicize the existence of manuscripts but the new technology gives us the chance to move a step closer to putting researcher and document in touch.

Brown University has reproduced parts of its printed Guide to Manuscripts on its homepage. Useful information about hours, phone numbers, admission requirements and major collections are addressed, but the site only hints about the rich variety of material available there.⁵

Yale University has a charming homepage for the whole University, at least in my estimation, because it suggests that the designers visited the rare books area. It also seems to make a strong statement about the importance of scholarship there. Working through the Yale's website to the Beinecke Library and its archival collection, we discover that the Beinecke has also produced an online version of its printed guide. Access is helpful but it is not searchable by keyword,

5. The Brown University site is <http://www.brown.edu>. Transparencies of portions of the Brown University site and other homepages were shown during the presentation. All of these sites, except the National Archives and Records Administration one, are under copyright and cannot be reproduced for publication.

and , of course, its immediacy is lost almost as soon as it was published in 1994.⁶

The University of Southern California Special Collections Department has an imaginative and very public-relations oriented website, although it is not useful for researchers searching for material on specific topic. With digital imaging the Department can display its beautiful reading room, but the viewer is informed that the library's online system lists only some of the manuscripts collections available. The user has to depend on in-house finding aids and staff members for access to its holdings. USC's Library Showcase, part of the USC Libraries homepage, does give the Special Collections Department along with other areas further opportunities to show off some of its materials. Past and current exhibits in the Department of Special Collections can be viewed with considerable completeness over the Web. Focusing in on the current exhibit, Goddesses and Patriarchs, we can learn more about the pieces on display, see pictures of them, and find out about the artists who created these works. A complete inventory of each exhibit is available online. Exhibits produced over the past several years are

6. <http://www.yale.edu> is the URL for the Yale University homepage. The Beinecke Library is <http://www.yale.edu/beinecke/brblhome>.

handled with the same thoroughness.⁷

In England the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester uses the Internet to show the world images of some of its prized holdings as well as its elaborate nineteenth-century reading room. As with the USC Special Collections website, this one gives hints but does not give a historical researcher concrete help. Information about the manuscripts and printed books is the same as could probably be obtained from a brochure. Rylands Library most effectively uses the Web in its "Gallery of Images: The Library and its Stock." By clicking on an image in the Gallery one can find out more about the library and see color pictures of some of its rarest pieces like the 1501 Virgil or the Parisian Book of Hours in more detail.⁸

The United States National Archives has also recently built an interesting website. It is more public-relations oriented than informational, but it hints of more of the latter to come. The potential user gets no closer to the specific documents than he could before but he can see certain images from the huge NARA collection. NARA (National Archives Records Administration) has put its printed guide online.

7. The URL is <http://www.usc.edu/Library/showcase.html>.

8. [Http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/datal/dg/text/jrumdg.html](http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/datal/dg/text/jrumdg.html).

Anyone who has done work in the record groups themselves knows that there is a world of difference between the skeletal description of a record group and the mass of material actually existing in it.

NARA is constructing an American West Online site to link to its homepage that may give a more detailed description of its holdings, both paper and visual. In the meantime the site presents a large number of digitized images from the Still Picture Branch. One of the buttons gives access by "search caption and description." A search for the term 'Fort Omaha,' brings up a list of photo identification numbers with dates. The user can click on the individual number to bring up a digitized image of the photo and the caption on the original. My search brought up more than Fort Omaha, however. I got Fort Keogh in Montana and Fort Wingate in New Mexico as well as a military parade of Fort Omaha troops in Omaha. The project was done by the University of Nebraska Press.⁹

The Special Collections Department of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has a researcher-friendly page that puts the potential user one step closer to the actual documents than any site seen so far.

One can browse through the complete list of

9. [Http://www.nara.gov/nara/kiosk.html](http://www.nara.gov/nara/kiosk.html).

11

collections with finding aids online. The name of each is given, usually with comprehensive dates and a word or two about the subject, i.e. Smokies author, educator, UT president. The site does not contain a statement about how much of the UT Special Collections Department holdings are included in the homepage. The list may represent the total holdings, or it may indicate only a small portion. This information would be helpful to any researcher trying to gauge whether or not this university might be worth a trip.

The most useful feature of the UT Special Collections site is its search engine. The browser can locate all the finding aids to listed collections by key word. This has its hazards, of course. The term 'civil war' showed up in nearly half of the collections. A more focused search for 'Ku Klux Klan' found only one, the Samual Mays Arnell Collection. By retrieving the complete inventory of this collection, including an overall description and listing of folder contents, one discovered that the family saved some newspaper clippings along with much else. Among the former were two clippings on outrages committed by the Klan in Tennessee after the Civil War. This search revealed precisely what the UT-Knoxville Special Collections Department had available online about the

KuKluxKlan.10

Another site explores keyword searching on an even broader scale - over the inventories of manuscript collections in several major archival collections. Although this project is still in the exploratory stages, it points the way towards the future.

In 1993 the University of California-Berkeley Library received a grant to encode archival finding aids in SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language). In 1995 participants in a conference funded by the Commission on Preservation and Access urged the researchers to continue expanding. At this point the team has encoded finding aids from seven institutions, including Duke University, the Library of Congress, and the Wisconsin State Historical Society. "Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the online finding aid database is the ability to search across multiple titles and even across finding aids from multiple institutions."¹¹ Carried out to its fullest extent, this or a similar project could eventually give a researcher online access to the finding aids of every manuscript depository in the country.

Archivists are making use of the Web as part of

10. <http://www.lib.utk.edu/utk-online-catalog/manuscripts>.

11. "How to Search the Online Finding Aid Collection," Berkeley Finding Aid Project Homepage, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/FindingAids/>

13

their acquisitions functions, for public relations, and to put the researcher one step closer to their collections. While all three components are important, the growing ability to make the holdings of their departments more accessible is perhaps the most significant. The Special Collections Department website and the Berkeley Finding Aid Project are two examples of the way most archivists would like to be going.